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UNCLAS FREETOWN 000102

SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (REMOVING PARAGRAPH MARKINGS)

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W (JHUNTER/ESPRUILL)

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [SL](#)
SUBJECT: PUJEHUN BYE-ELECTIONS POSTPONED DUE TO ALLEGED
VIOLENCE

REF: FREETOWN 99

¶1. The National Electoral Commission (NEC) postponed the planned March 14 bye-election in Pujehun District, based on allegations of politically-motivated violence and their subsequent inability to adequately prepare for the election on-site. National Election Watch (NEW) released a statement on March 16 stating that APC thugs had stabbed the wife of the district's SLPP chairman, and that a clash occurred between APC and SLPP supporters. NEW went on to blame the Sierra Leone Police for not providing adequate protection, particularly to SLPP members, despite their constitutional responsibility to do so. NEW also said that the Resident Minister for the South, an APC-appointed official, intimidated the constituency and incited APC supporters to violence.

¶2. Poloff spoke with the UN Senior Police Advisor, who had visited Pujehun on March 13 in response to the reported tension. He told Poloff that, though there was definitely tension between the parties, the incidents had been largely overblown. For example, the SLPP chairman told the Advisor that his wife had not been stabbed, but had actually been bitten by a snake. He learned that other "clashes" had involved name-calling and some fisticuffs, but ended quickly. The Advisor did not believe that the rumors were deliberately designed to postpone the election, but instead reflected "business as usual" when it comes to elections in Sierra Leone (Note: During both the 2007 and 2008 elections, rumors flew around the country about politically-motivated attacks, murders, property destruction, and harassment. While some of these rumors were substantiated, most were found to be highly exaggerated versions of the truth. End note).

¶3. NEC Chairperson Dr. Christiana Thorpe warned political leaders on March 16 that NEC must be allowed to conduct elections without interference. Like NEW, she criticized the Resident Minister for the South, and his visit to the district immediately prior to the planned bye-election. She said that the minister was accompanied by security forces, which instigated violence and intimidated voters.

¶4. Comment: As far as post is aware, the postponement is not linked to the APC-SLPP riots on March 13 and March 16 (reftel), despite media reports to the contrary. However, rumors reaching Freetown from Pujehun were likely one of the catalysts intensifying party rivalries and tensions in the capital. NEC has yet to release a new date for the bye-election, but will have to wait until the country as a whole returns to a general state of calm. We believe progress was made today during the Diplomatic Corps' meeting at the UN with all political party leaders. End Comment.
PERRY